

Folklore alive and thriving in Utah cemeteries

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Tombstones silhouetted against the sky. An iron gate swinging in the wind. A lonely tumbleweed blowing across the road. Silence.

Why would any living soul want to spend a lot of time in such a place? Well, Carol Edison has the answer to that question. Graveyards, she says, are fascinating spots — picturesque, peaceful and loaded with folklore and history. In a cemetery, especially an old Utah cemetery, you can find more tales about the colorful past than in many books on the library shelves.

"Even when I was a child I used to look forward to Memorial Day," she explains. "I remember how much fun it was to explore and discover quaint tombstones. It was like stepping into a time machine and traveling back to yesterday."

Today when she pays a call on the dearly-departed, it might be on Memorial Day or any other day of the year. The young woman, who was born in Seattle and reared in Utah, goes graveyard exploring, camera in hand, just as often as possible. The reason: she's deeply involved in a research project — a comprehensive study of the state's cemeteries, stonecarvers and the fascinating folk art they chiseled.

The unusual project began several years ago. At the time, the English major who received degrees from the University of Utah, was working with a local film-maker doing documentaries.

Along came Hal Cannon, folk arts coordinator at the Utah Arts Council, with a job offer. The council was putting together a teacher resource package on death and dying and needed someone to be in charge. The package, he explained, would eventually become part of a group of educational materials dealing with various folk arts in Utah, and would be incorporated into the school system.

Carol was intrigued and took the job. Soon the new arts council employee was in touch with Martha Schack and Maury Haseltine who knew a great deal about tombstone carving; soon she was pouring over the work of Utah folklorists Austin and Alta Fife.

Armed with valuable background material, the former film-maker launched her own research — driving to cemeteries throughout the

state, Ghost towns, small towns, big towns — she went to them all and is still going, making rubbings, talking with sextons and gathering data.

"It has become a whole lot more than a job for me. It's my hobby and a real personal commitment. I've given lectures and slide presentations with the materials I've gathered; I helped put together a folk arts catalog. We've put on displays and exhibits. And someday I'd like to compile a book."

If and when she does, her ever-growing collection of fascinating photographs will probably take up a major portion — photos that show everything from charming old sandstone markers to modern works of art in sleek granite.

Although hundreds of tombstones with quaint inscriptions have been focused-in through her view-finder, she still gets a thrill from happening on to a well-preserved burial site such as the Santa Clara cemetery (the dry climate of Southern Utah has kept the carvings clear and distinct).

Another favorite graveyard is in Castle Gate. And then, of course, there's Salt Lake's own City Cemetery — an impressive gallery of tombstone folk art from the pioneer days.

In those early times, according to Carol, men and women who had been uprooted from their homes to make the trek across the plains, longed for a feeling of permanence. This longing, combined with the availability of stone in the mountains, led them to erect markers of sturdy rock instead of wooden crosses which often were used in the West.

Sandstone was the primary material, and one of the first stone quarries was Red Butte Canyon, located near Ft. Douglas.

Those first carvers painstakingly chiseled vital information into the soft and sandy rock, frequently decorating their work with traditional design elements that evoked life, death and mourning.

To date, Carol has been able to identify a number of skilled craftsmen who produced markers locally. Signatures on stones, distinctive stylistic traits, typical symbols help to set them apart.

Her favorites: William Ward, W. W. Player and Charles Lambert — all accomplished English artisans who were converted to the Latter-

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